

## Turkey shifts the focus of its foreign policy: from Syria to the eastern Mediterranean and Libya

Seufert, Günter

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# SWP Comment

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## Turkey Shifts the Focus of Its Foreign Policy

From Syria to the Eastern Mediterranean and Libya

Günter Seufert

On 27 November 2019, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan declared that Turkey had concluded a treaty on military assistance and cooperation with the government of Fayeze al-Sarraj in Libya. The agreement permits the deployment of Turkish troops into the civil-war-torn country. The announcement was met with almost unanimous criticism in Western Europe. The indignation grew even greater when it became known that Turkey was controlling and financing the smuggling of Islamic Syrian fighters into Libya. Reports of a dominant influence of the Muslim Brotherhood on the Libyan government seemed to complete the picture of a strongly Islamist-motivated Turkish policy.

However, Turkey's engagement in Libya is not driven by ideology, but rather by strategic considerations and economic interests. Ankara is thus reacting to its isolation in the eastern Mediterranean, where the dispute over the distribution of gas resources is intensifying. At the same time, Turkey is drawing lessons from the war in Syria. Ankara has lost this war, but through its engagement in Syria, it has been able to establish a conflictual – but viable – working relationship with Russia. The bottom line is that Turkey's commitment to Libya is a shift in the focus of its foreign policy from the Middle East to the Mediterranean, a shift that will present entirely new challenges to Europe, the European Union (EU), and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

On 15 January 2020, *The Guardian* reported that Turkey has so far deployed 650 irregular fighters to Libya, members of the so-called Syrian National Army, which is a union of armed opposition groups created by Turkey. Another 1,350 had also been withdrawn from Syria and were being prepared in Turkey for deployment to Libya. Turkey is withdrawing fighters from Syria, although the fighting there continues and Turkish troops are still being deployed to the country.

### There Is Little to Gain in Syria

In Ankara, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) has buried its hopes of bringing the likeminded Muslim Brotherhood to power in Syria and then using the country as a gateway for Turkish power projection in the Middle East. For Turkey, what remains to be done is to prevent Syrian Kurds from re-establishing the self-governing structures in the north-west and

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north-east of Syria that Turkish troops destroyed during invasions in 2018 and 2019. Already at the beginning of the Astana process — the series of conferences launched by Russia, Iran, and Turkey in December 2016 to end the Syrian war — Ankara officially refrained from overthrowing Bashar al-Assad. On 21 December 2016, Turkey committed itself in Moscow to support the Syrian government in reaching an agreement with the armed opposition.

Although Erdoğan still presents himself to voters as being unyielding towards al-Assad, Turkey confirmed a meeting between the heads of the Syrian and Turkish secret services in Moscow on 13 January 2020. At the meeting, Ankara urged the Syrians to agree on a common strategy in the fight against Syria's autonomy-seeking Kurds. Even prior to that meeting, the Turkish side had conceded several times that it considers the presence of its troops in Syria to be temporary.

## Lessons from the Syrian War

The AKP had to draw a number of painful lessons from the war in Syria, both from the war's course and its outcome. First, contrary to expectations, there are no cases in which the Arab upheaval has led to the rule of parties that are ideologically close to the AKP. On the contrary, in Cairo and Damascus, secularist regimes are again — or still — in power. These regimes do not trust Ankara because of its support of the Muslim Brotherhood. This also applies to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which have declared the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organisation. Thus, the dream is over that Turkey could rise to become the leading power of like-minded Arab states. Second, due to the decline of Syrian statehood, Syria's Kurds have become political and military actors. This development has revived Turkey's deep-rooted fear of Kurdish separatism and made Ankara once again the defender of the status quo in the Middle East. This turn in its policy has enabled the AKP to close ranks

with the old elites of the security bureaucracy, who have always taken a hard line towards Greece and Cyprus. Third, Syria's Kurds have only been able to develop into a power factor due to their alliance with the United States. As a result, the government paints Washington as the primary threat to the survival of the Turkish state, and large segments of the population have come to adopt that viewpoint. This is grist for the mills of so-called Eurasianist circles, which demand that Turkey turn its back on the West for good. Fourth — despite all the setbacks — it is primarily due to its cooperation with Moscow that Ankara is still an actor in Syria. Without the approval of the Kremlin, Ankara would not have been able either to invade Afrin in the north-west of Syria in 2018, nor to send troops into the north-east of the country in 2019. Moreover, without Turkey's rapprochement with Moscow and without the concomitant concern of the United States and its NATO partners about losing Turkey, Ankara would probably not have succeeded in October 2019 in persuading Washington to severely restrict its cooperation with the Kurds and to initiate the withdrawal of US troops from Syria. Fifth, in Syria, Ankara and Moscow have created a pattern of simultaneous rivalry and cooperation that is now extended to Libya.

Ankara sought this cooperation in 2016, although it was primarily Russian intervention that prevented the overthrow of the Assad regime sought by Turkey. Turkey continued to cooperate with Russia, despite the fact that Moscow did not declare either the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) or its Syrian branch, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), a terrorist organisation and despite all the pressure put on Assad from the Kremlin to take Kurdish concerns into account. Ankara remains committed to the alliance with Russia, even today as Assad's troops — with overt Russian military support — attack the last stronghold of the Turkey-backed Syrian opposition in Idlib, sending huge waves of migrants towards the Turkish border. Only the alliance with Russia will strengthen its position vis-à-vis

the United States and Europe. The same applies — beyond all bilateral conflicts of interest — for Moscow.

The Kremlin's ability to manage conflicts and establish cooperation with Ankara has provided legitimacy to the Astana process — by including Turkey as a representative of the Syrian opposition — and allowed Russia to become the dominant power in the Syrian peace process. And it is Moscow's cooperation with Ankara in Libya — concretised in the jointly presented demand for a ceasefire — that has made Ankara and Moscow legitimate players in the peace process, whereas they were previously actors circumventing an arms embargo imposed by the United Nations. Both states are winning the game at the expense of Western players. Ankara's policy in the eastern Mediterranean is also primarily directed against Western actors — this time EU member states.

### **Ankara's Isolation in the Eastern Mediterranean**

On 11 November 2019, the European Council decided on a range of possible sanctions against Turkish natural and legal persons engaged in “illegal exploratory drilling” undertaken by Turkish research vessels in the internationally recognised Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of the Republic of Cyprus. The fact that Brussels can now actually implement such sanctions has so far not impressed the Turkish government. The same accounts for an earlier package of even softer EU sanctions adopted and executed already in July 2019. As part of these measures, pre-accession aid has been further reduced, negotiations on an aviation agreement suspended, fixed bilateral forums suspended, and lending by the European Investment Bank restricted.

In its operations in the eastern Mediterranean, Turkey relies on its navy, which has been upgraded in recent years. Its ships not only escort Turkish drilling vessels in Cypriot waters, but also take action against research vessels of other nations. For exam-

ple, in February 2018, a Turkish naval squadron pushed a research platform of the Italian energy company ENI out of the waters of the EEZ. The same happened in the first week of December 2019 to the Israeli research vessel *Bat Galim*, which was sailing in the EEZ in agreement with the Cypriot government.

Turkey's only recourse is to flex its muscle because it has isolated itself diplomatically in the eastern Mediterranean. The Republic of Cyprus has demarcated its EEZ in agreements with Israel, Egypt, and Lebanon (the latter deal has not yet been ratified by the Lebanese Parliament) on the basis of international maritime law. Israel had already signed a similar agreement in 1996 with the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan on the very same legal basis. Greece has gone some way to conduct a similar agreement with Egypt and is preparing an agreement with Cyprus.

Turkey, on the other hand, has fallen out with all of these states — a Turkish ambassador is still stationed in only one of them, Greece. Ankara has not acceded to the Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and thus considers null and void the treaties that other states have concluded with each other on the basis of this convention. It is therefore more than understandable that Greece, the Republic of Cyprus, Israel, and Egypt have established a diplomatic front against Turkey. In recent years, they have expanded their military cooperation, and in January 2019, together with Jordan, the Palestinian Authority, and Italy, they founded the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum in Cairo to coordinate the research, production, and marketing of gas deposits. The EU is threatening Turkey with sanctions. For its part, the United States welcomes the cooperation between Israel and Greece and is strengthening its military presence in the region.

### **Turkey's Engagement in Libya and Consequences for Europe**

Against this background, Turkey concluded an agreement on 27 November 2019 on the

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**SWP**  
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik  
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3–4  
10719 Berlin  
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0  
Fax +49 30 880 07-100  
[www.swp-berlin.org](http://www.swp-berlin.org)  
[swp@swp-berlin.org](mailto:swp@swp-berlin.org)

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mutual demarcation of continental shelves in the Mediterranean and a treaty on military cooperation with the embattled Libyan Government of National Accord. As early as November 2010 – still in the time of Muammar al-Gaddafi – Turkey had tried to reach an agreement with Libya on the limitation of the two countries' continental shelves. From 2018 onwards, Ankara started to work on the issue again, taking advantage this time of the precarious situation of the Libyan government. However, Tripoli resisted Turkey's demand until November 2019. It gave in only on the condition that a military assistance agreement be concluded simultaneously.

The Libyan-Turkish treaty for the demarcation of the continental shelves only defines a relatively short borderline south-east of Crete, but it harbours enormous explosive power. For the first time, Turkey has succeeded in agreeing with a neighbouring state on a border in the eastern Mediterranean, which undoubtedly increases the legitimacy of Turkey's position and has the potential to weaken the positions of Cyprus, Greece, and Israel. What is more, the treaty is based on the thesis, which has so far only been advocated by Turkey, that islands do not have their own continental shelf and therefore cannot establish their own EEZs. This calls into question not only the EEZ of the Republic of Cyprus, but also the status of the Greek islands, in particular Crete – a status that is recognised by all other neighbouring countries. In Ankara's eyes, the agreement with Libya entitles Turkey to become active south-east of Crete in waters that will be part of the Greek EEZ once an agreement between Athens and Nicosia is signed. Turkey is already stating that the EastMed pipeline – planned by Greece, the Republic of Cyprus, and Israel, and foreseen to run south-east of Crete – can now only be realised with Ankara's consent. Ankara will make every effort to bring Israel, Egypt, Lebanon, and Syria in line with its own

interpretation. To achieve this, Turkey will point out that all these states would see an enlargement of their (potential) EEZs if they were to align with the Turkish position and deny islands the ability to establish EEZs. The immediate effect of the two Turkish-Libyan agreements and of the ensuing deployment of Turkish soldiers and Syrian fighters to Libya has been a rise in tensions, both in Libya and in the eastern Mediterranean. In Libya, the fighting has intensified. In the eastern Mediterranean, where France and Egypt had held joint military exercises before, the new situation has triggered joint naval manoeuvres by France, Italy, and Cyprus as well as by Russia and Syria, in addition to a maritime arms show by Egypt.

Turkey is determined to assert its positions – there is no doubt about that. Ankara is upgrading its navy. In the next three years alone, it will put 20 more ships into service. Unlike its policy in Syria, the AKP's policy in the eastern Mediterranean is receiving great levels of support in the military and security bureaucracy of Turkey. The European Union and NATO must prepare themselves for Russian-Turkish cooperation to be deepened, consolidated, and extended to the eastern Mediterranean. The thrust of future Turkish foreign policy is likely to be directed primarily towards two EU members: Greece and the Republic of Cyprus. More than ever before, the EU is being called upon to develop a coherent Turkey policy. Brussels must clearly show Ankara that there is a European threshold of pain. However, Brussels should also make offers to cooperate with Turkey, such as modernising the customs union with the EU and/or mediating the dispute over gas in the Mediterranean. Otherwise, Turkey has little to lose by further escalating the conflict in the eastern Mediterranean.

*Dr Günter Seufert is Head of the Centre for Applied Turkey Studies (CATS) at SWP.*

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